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ABSTRACT

The "Education for the Future Initiative" is a national, privately-funded program initially sponsored by the Telesis Foundation and recently joined by Arthur Andersen & Co. to help schools undertake continuous improvement. The Initiative has pioneered a framework for school improvement in the form of a school portfolio. This document offers a rational for compiling a comprehensive school portfolio and presents a continuum for assessing progress at the approach, implementation, and outcome stages. The portfolio is comprised of the following elements: information and analysis, leadership, student achievement, quality planning, professional development, partnership development, and continuous improvement and evaluation. This form of assessment has characteristics similar to measures of successful business organizations: a simple presentation, visible measurements, stakeholder involvement, an undistorted collection of primary information, an uncomplicated measurement approach, and an overall sense of urgency and perpetual improvement. The purpose and uses of a school portfolio are also described. Two figures are included. (LMI)

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A Framework for School Change—The School Portfolio

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A school portfolio is like a ***garden*** *—*
It takes planning and hard work,
requires the weeding out of unnecessary elements,
and promotes positive feelings.
You're proud to show it off!

A school portfolio is like a ***photograph album*** *—*
It brings back memories for the people involved,
shows changes over time, and
introduces people to thinking
in ways they have never thought before.

A school portfolio is like ***an old master's painting*** *—*
It captures the school's essence, and yet,
a closer look reveals interesting details.
The more you study it, the more you see.

A school portfolio is like a ***wise friend*****—**
It listens and clarifies your ideas,
is something you don't want to lose, and
provides insight to help you create your future.

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Education for the Future Initiative

Anyone who is aware of the *Education for the Future Initiative* would not be surprised to find that all of its schools are using the same tool—a practical, data-intense School Portfolio—to meet the diverse challenges of school improvement. Since its conception in 1989, the *Education for the Future Initiative*, initially sponsored by the Telesis Foundation in San Francisco, and now joined by Arthur Andersen & Co., has led the cause of educational reform in California. Acting on recommendations from the California Business Roundtable and other school restructuring reports, the *Initiative* was designed to help schools understand the overall process of school change, how to think through what to improve, how to improve, how to implement the improvement, and then how to measure to determine whether the improvement is making a difference.

The work of the *Initiative* is based on the belief that the concepts of continuous improvement can make a difference in the world of education and on a desire to help schools with the enormous challenge of school improvement. Within these beliefs are the following concepts: For real and appropriate changes to be implemented, schools must identify and understand the needs of the students, teachers, and the school community. School staff must develop and work from a shared vision, based on the values, beliefs and personal visions of the individuals in the school community. Schools must develop and use governance structures that support a bottom-up approach to decision-making. Schools must create and make decisions based on a comprehensive action plan which includes its community as true partners, evaluates the impact of new instructional strategies, and establishes and supports school improvement practices. Schools must increase teachers' repertoire of skills and understanding, requiring strong teachers and principals capable of

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new levels of communication who understand that the work is hard, and that school improvement is never ending.

While working with its schools to achieve these goals over the past six years, the *Initiative* has pioneered a unique framework for school improvement in the form of a School Portfolio. This comprehensive School Portfolio framework—used in conjunction with assessment criteria adapted from the business world—allows for a deep understanding of the school elements and processes that need to be improved, how to carry out the improvement efforts, the expected outcomes of the approach to improvement, and the results of the effort. The School Portfolio captures the "big picture" of the school and illustrates how its many elements interrelate to make a whole. The School Portfolio provides a framework that successfully supports schools as they implement, assess, and internalize improved instructional and governance practices.

A Framework for School Improvement

The School Portfolio is a purposeful collection of work that tells the story of a school. It describes efforts to engender and maintain systemic and continuous school improvement and documents the school's goals, vision, plans and progress. The School Portfolio is always evolving, growing, improving, and enabling schools to make better decisions.

The comprehensive School Portfolio provides a uniquely appropriate and effective framework for describing current processes, and for planning, monitoring, and evaluating school improvement efforts. It guides the improvement of what is most important to the school and is able to reflect the multidimensionality of each unique school organization. It simplifies the evaluation of schools—which are by nature complex organizations—by offering a means to monitor the parts and their interrelationships as they compose the whole.

What makes the School Portfolio effective?

"What gets measured gets done." Tom Peters

In an effort to design an evaluation responsive to both the Telesis Foundation and the *Initiative* schools, the *Initiative* worked with its schools and funders to understand the depth of the effort and to determine how it could be measured. Ultimately new planning and assessment tools were designed. With adaptations of the Malcolm Baldrige Award Program for Quality Business Management, measurement rubrics named the *Education for the Future* Continuous Improvement Continuums resulted to form the basis of the School Portfolio. These rubrics identify outcome expectations and provide an authentic means for on-going self-assessment by the school in seven interrelated areas crucial to systemic school change:

Information and Analysis is a critical element in planning for change, and in supporting continual school improvement. Schools must analyze existing and collect additional information to understand how to meet the needs of their clients, to understand the root causes of problems, to assess growth, and to predict the types of educational programs that will be needed in the future. The intent of this continuum is to establish systematic and rigorous reliance on hard data for decision-making in all parts of the organization. This continuum assists schools in thinking through appropriate information to gather on an on-going basis and analyses to make that will prevent implementing changes on a piecemeal basis or in a manner that does not get to the root causes of the "problems" at hand.

Leadership focuses on creating a learning environment that encourages everyone to contribute to making school have a cumulative, purposeful effect on student learning. A quality leadership infrastructure emphasizes the prevention of problems, such as student failure, as opposed to short-term solving or covering up of problems, and makes the school change effort conceivable in a school. This continuum assists schools in thinking through shared decision-making and leadership structures that will work with their specific population, climate and vision.

Figure 1. Education for the Future Continuous Continuums for Leadership

	1	2	3	4	5
APPROACH	Principal as decision maker. Decisions are reactive to district, state and federal mandates. There is no knowledge of continuous improvement.	A shared decision-making structure is put into place and discussions begin on how to achieve a school vision. Most decisions are focused on solving problems and are reactive.	Leadership team is committed to continuous improvement. Leadership seeks inclusion of all school sectors and supports study teams by making time provisions for their work.	Leadership team represents a true shared decision-making structure. Study teams are reconstructed for the implementation of a comprehensive continuous improvement plan.	A strong continuous improvement structure is set into place that allows for input from all sectors of the school, district, and community, ensuring strong communication, flexibility, and refinement of approach and beliefs. The school vision is student focused, based on data and appropriate for school/community values, and meeting student needs.
IMPLEMENTATION	Principal makes all decisions, with little or no input from teachers, the community or students. Inspect for mistakes is the leadership approach.	School values and beliefs are identified; the purpose of school is defined; a school mission and student exit outcomes are developed with representative input. A structure for studying approaches to achieving essential student learnings is established.	Leadership team is active on study teams and integrates recommendations from the teams' research and analyses to form a comprehensive plan for continuous improvement within the context of the school mission. Everyone is kept informed.	Decisions about budget and implementation approach to the vision are made within teams, by the principal, by the Leadership team, and the full staff as appropriate. All decisions are communicated to the Leadership team and the full staff.	The vision is implemented and articulated across all grade levels and into feeder schools. Quality standards are reinforced throughout the school. All members of the school community understand and apply the quality standards. Leadership team has systematic interactions and involvement with district administrators, teachers, parents and students about the school's direction.
OUTCOME	Decisions lack focus and consistency. There is little staff buy-in. Students and parents who do not feel like they are being heard. Decision-making process is clear and known.	The mission provides a focus for all school improvement and guides the action to the vision. Teachers and community are committed to continuous improvement. Quality leadership techniques are used sporadically.	Leaders are seen as committed to planning and quality improvement. Critical areas for improvement are identified. All faculty feel included in shared decision making.	There is evidence that the leadership team listens to all levels of the organization. Implementation of the continuous improvement plan is linked to essential student learnings and the guiding principles of the school. Teachers are empowered.	Site-based management and shared decision-making truly exists. Teachers understand and display an intimate knowledge of how the school operates. Teachers support and communicate with each other in the implementation of quality strategies. Teachers implement the vision in their classrooms and can determine how their new approach meets student needs and leads to the attainment of essential student learnings.

Student Achievement describes processes to increasing student achievement—the school's "Constancy of Purpose." The intent of this component is to support schools in moving from a fire-fighting approach to one of systemic *prevention* of student failure; teachers from providers of information to researchers who understand and can predict the impact of their actions on student achievement; and students from recipients of knowledge delivery to goal-setting self-assessors who produce independent, quality work. This continuum assists schools in thinking through who the students are, understanding the *why* behind the curriculum, instruction, and assessment, as opposed to describing and recommending approaches. Those critical processes have to be determined by staff and are beyond the scope of this book.

Quality Planning by schools must be strategic or change efforts will not be implemented. A well-defined and well-executed school improvement effort is based on a strategic plan that provides a logical direction for change. This continuum assists schools in developing the elements of a strategic plan including a mission that describes the purpose of the school; a vision that represents the long-range goals of the school; goals that promote the mission; an action plan—procedural steps needed to implement the goals, including timelines and accountability; outcome measures; and a plan for continuous improvement and evaluation.

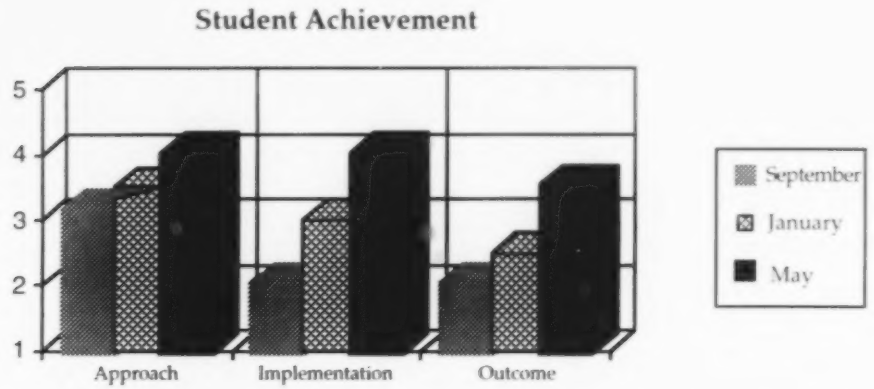
Professional Development helps staff members, teachers, and principals change the manner in which they work—how they make decisions, gather, analyze and utilize data, plan, teach, monitor achievement, evaluate personnel, and assess the impact of new approaches to instruction and student assessment. Professional development provides individuals with opportunities to improve their personal performance on a continuous basis and to learn new skills for working with each other in reforming their culture and workplace. This continuum assists schools in thinking through and planning for appropriate professional development activities that will help them reach their school's vision.

Partnership Development with the school's community must benefit all partners. This continuum assists schools in understanding the purposes of, approaches to, and planning for educational partnerships with business and community groups, parents, other educational professionals, and students covered in this continuum.

Continuous Improvement and Evaluation of all operations of the school is essential to schools seeking systemic improvement in the manner in which they do business. This continuum assists schools in further understanding the interrelationships of the components of continuous improvement and in improving their process and products on an on-going basis.

Education for the Future Initiative schools assess their progress on each of these continuums three times each year and then chart the progress made in the School Portfolio. This assessment process brings the staff together to shape and maintain their shared vision and provides motivation for the continuous improvement of all elements of the school. Since the Continuums are not static, this assessment process also generates feedback to the Initiative that is used to improve the Continuums and design more effective ways to sustain school improvement.

Figure 2. Assessment Ratings on Student Achievement Continuum for the Year



With the Continuous Improvement Continuums as a base, the School Portfolio has all of the characteristics common to measurements used to create successful business organizations as defined by Tom Peters in Thriving on Chaos (1987):

- *a simple presentation*—easy to read and understand text, graphs, and charts, available for viewing by interested parties at any time;
- *visible measurements*—located in the portfolio, developed or adopted by staff;
- *everyone's involvement*—in the design and development, in activities described within, and in keeping it current;
- *an undistorted collection of primary information*—such as historical student achievement and demographic data;
- *a straightforward measurement approach*—using a combination of criteria and outcomes that explicitly describe what is important to and what is to be measured by school staff;
- *an overall feel of urgency and perpetual improvement*—which results from the discrepancy between where the school is and where the school wants to be, and from a sense of accountability on the part of the staff to move the school to where it wants to be (to show improvement) as compared to criteria and outcomes.

Purpose and Uses of a School Portfolio

The School Portfolios created by the *Education for the Future Initiative* schools have proven valuable for many different purposes:

- *Establish one document that describes an overall school plan, and the school's mission, vision, beliefs, and rationale for improvement.*
  Too often schools wrestle with many different school plans, each designed to meet the requirements of a particular regulatory agency, program, or grant. Until these plans are coalesced into one plan—understood and supported by staff—the school's vision will not be achievable. A School Portfolio helps maintain one overall school plan congruent with the school vision.

- *Document efforts on a number of elements important to school improvement.*
  A School Portfolio is a flexible, physical entity which documents the depth, breadth, and growth of a comprehensive school improvement effort, allowing schools and programs to concentrate on important areas at different times as necessary.

- *Understand the complexities of the school organization.*
  As they identify and document change related to the elements and processes of their school, school staff begin to understand the complex elements that make up the school and the interrelationships of the elements. This understanding is necessary to uncover root causes of problems, to discover solutions, and to ensure the congruence of the elements within the whole.

- *Provide readily accessible and necessary information for data-based decision-making.*
  A comprehensive School Portfolio includes data about the school—its population, facilities, resources, test scores, self-assessment results—as well as the school's vision for the future. This data establishes a context for all aspects of the school improvement effort.

- *Reflect on progress and purpose.*
  One element important to the motivation of staff as they work on the enormous task of systemic school improvement is a periodic review of the progress they have made. A School Portfolio allows staff to see what they have achieved, illustrates the benefits of their hard work, reminds them of where they were when they started and why they are making the changes they are working so hard to make.

- *Trouble-shoot the continuous improvement efforts of the school.*
  The School Portfolio visually chronicles the progress (or lack of progress) made in each element of the school improvement process in text, graphs, charts, and pictures. This information helps a school staff decide where to focus efforts needed to increase the effectiveness of their actions. Additionally, the School Portfolio can be used to identify elements incongruent with the school's vision, mission, outcomes, and plan which deter the progress of the school's improvement efforts.

- *Assess and guide the school's unique approach to continuous improvement.*
  Using this multifaceted School Portfolio approach staff can monitor the improvement process against established criteria. These criteria are useful for self-assessment and as guides for determining next steps toward the outcome. The portfolio approach and use of criteria provide for the assessment of progress on the individual elements as well as on the combination of elements that make up a comprehensive school improvement plan. The assessment is multidimensional—like schools—and flexible and, therefore, more extensive, relevant, and consequently more useful than relying solely on unidimensional product assessments such as test scores.

- *Be Accountable.*
  A comprehensive School Portfolio documents action plans, effort, and products which are assessed on a regular basis, demanding a high level of accountability.

- *Communicate.*
  A comprehensive School Portfolio effectively serves as a public record to communicate important information about the school—its purpose, mission and vision, the values and beliefs held by staff, its plans for improvement, the reasons particular approaches have been chosen, and the results of the school improvement efforts. The portfolio is an effective way to keep school district

officials informed of school improvement efforts and progress, and helps to maintain district support. The School Portfolio also effectively communicates to potential partners basic information about the school, the steps in the school improvement process, and how potential partners can contribute to the effort.

- *Replace a local, state, or regional accreditation process.*
  Because School Portfolios are comprehensive and focus on an inclusive plan for school improvement, they are being used successfully in place of traditional evaluation and accreditation processes. Accrediting agencies and state departments of education are beginning to acknowledge that working with discrete elements of a school plan in program reviews can actually keep schools from making progress towards their vision. Alternatively, a school focused on implementing one school vision, and one comprehensive school plan congruent with that vision, is poised to achieve the vision.

Will the School Portfolio Work for Other Schools?
The *Education for the Future Initiative* believes that using the concepts of continuous improvement in education, as demonstrated through the use of the Continuous Improvement Continuums and the School Portfolio, can work wherever schools are committed to changing the way they operate.

Using a school portfolio with assessment criteria for school improvement will help everyone in the school understand her/his part in moving the school to a vision. While each school portfolio will be unique, it is important that the portfolio be an evolving document that reflects the assessment of the staff rather than an individual, and that it be accessible to everyone in the school community.

Summary
Because school improvement is an on-going, complex and multifaceted process, the portfolio is the most appropriate and authentic means to chronicle the multidimensionality of school improvement and its development over time. Schools that use a school portfolio benefit immensely from ownership and a shared meaning of the improvement process and its results. A school portfolio, combined with assessment criteria, allows for a deep understanding of the elements and processes of a school, what needs to be improved and why, how the school plans to carry out the improvement efforts, the expected outcomes of the approach to improvement, the efforts to implement the plan, and the results of the effort. A school portfolio provides a view of the big picture of all the elements and shows how they interrelate to make a whole. With a school portfolio, it is easy to see what needs to be altered to keep the efforts progressing.

The *Education for the Future Initiative* Continuous Improvement Continuums and the concept of the school portfolio are described in *The School Portfolio: A Framework for School Improvement*, published by Eye on Education, P.O. Box 388, Princeton Junction, NJ 08550.